

Alexander-Withrow House
2 North Main Street
Lexington (independent city)
Virginia

HABS No. VA-905

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ALEXANDER-WITHROW HOUSE

HABS No. VA-905

Location: 2 North Main Street, Lexington, Virginia

Present Owner: The Withrow Estate.

Present Occupant: None.

Present Use: None.

Brief Statement of
Significance:

Built in 1789, this is believed to be the only house in the area not destroyed by the great fire of 1796. The tradition that the town's first post office, bank (of which Stonewall Jackson was a director), and newspaper were located here is as yet unsubstantiated.

Part I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners: The Withrow House was erected prior to 1792 by William Alexander on lots purchased from the Trustees of the newly established Town of Lexington in 1784, a first sale. Following the death of William Alexander in 1797, the house was purchased in 1800 by Captain John Leyburn from the William Alexander estate. (Deed Book D, 260). In the Lexington Gazette for October 9, 1835 the property is advertised for sale as

that very desirable House and lot in Lexington, situated on the corner of Main Street obliquely opposite the Court House, and now occupied by Dr. Graham. The House is brick, and besides offering accommodation for a large family presents a favorable location for the merchant or tradesman, inasmuch as there is also a STORE, COUNTING ROOM & LUMBER HOUSE connected therewith, which have been successfully occupied in merchandizing for the last thirty years.

And while there is thus presented a stand for business but little, if at all, inferior to any other in the town, a two story BRICK KITCHEN, SMOKE HOUSE, ICE HOUSE, CARRIAGE HOUSE, STABLE, AND CISTERN with a pump make it altogether a comfortable family residence. The lot is large, facing upon two streets, and as there are about one hundred feet front on Main Street and provision made for an alley running through between this and the adjoining lot, ample space is provided for the erection of another large building if desirable...
(signed) A. Leyburn, Ex'r of John Leyburn, dec'd.

The house was not sold, for it was listed for rent in the Gazette of April 15, 1836 as follows:

The store and dwelling House directly opposite the Post Office the former lately occupied by Turner, Leyburn & Co, and the latter by Dr. Graham ...
(signed) A. Leyburn Ex'r of John Leyburn, dec'd.

The house remained in the Leyburn family until 1851, when Dr. Alfred Leyburn, John's son and executor, sold it to George A. Baker. (Deed Book BB,342). In 1882 George Baker executed a deed of trust in favor of Miss Elizabeth McDowell. (Deed Book MM) No further evidence has yet become available until 1901, when Deed Book 2, p. 295 indicates a deed release between the administrator of the estate of Elizabeth McDowell and Jack Withrow, et al., with William Banker, the executor of George Baker. Apparently as the result of a forced sale the house at this time came into the possession of Jack and Alice Withrow.

2. Date of erection: Between 1784, the year in which William Alexander purchased the lot for the Town Trustees, and 1792, the year in which Margaret Alexander married Edward Graham.
3. Architect: Unknown. Builder: Unknown.
4. Notes on alterations and additions: When the streets were lowered ten feet in the 1850's, the main floor became the present second floor, and the cut stone underpinnings installed, forming the present street level store rooms. It is probable that the roof was destroyed in the fire of 1796, and the present roof added at that time.

The most substantial evidence concerning the original building is found in a "Declaration for Assurance" made to The Mutual Assurance Society Against Fire on Buildings of the State of Virginia, dated March 23, 1802. Pertinent extracts follow:

The building on the Main and Washington Streets now occupied by myself as a dwelling and store situated between the lots of William Carruthers and that of Andrew Alexander . . . valued at \$3333.33 ...
(signed) John Leyburn.

There follow the signatures of three householders as appraisers: Cornelius Dorman, Benjamin Darst, and James Gold, who attach the following description:

Brick dwelling house 44 $\frac{1}{2}$ feet long 34 feet wide
2 stories above ground covered with wood. No building within twenty feet in any direction.

The following statement was added over John Leyburns signature:

The above described building was insured while in an unfinished state as will appear in my declaration No. 33 dated the 26th November 1800 and the policy No. 59 issued thereon by the Mutual Assurance Society of Virginia, the object of the present declaration is to obtain insurance for the additional repairs or the present value of the building... I have built a Brick Smoke House within 20 feet of my kitchen since the policy issued, consequently it will be subject to an additional premium. Lexington, March 23, 1802.
(signed) J. Leyburn.

The "unfinished state" referred to in the Declaration must refer to the progress of the repairs to the building following the fire of 1796.

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure:

The Withrow House is believed to be the only house in the area not destroyed by the great fire that devastated the heart of Lexington in 1796. William Alexander, the builder, was a substantial merchant, described in Duncan Lyle's Alexander Family as an active, energetic man of business with liberal and enlarged views. A founder of the Lexington Presbyterian Church, he was at times deputy sheriff and justice of the peace. Alexander's second son, Archibald, was to become President of Hampden Sydney College and later the founder of the Princeton Theological Seminary. In August 1801 the first issue of The Rockbridge Repository appeared, "printed by John McMullin in Washington Street next door to Captain John Leyburn, Merchant," perhaps in an office located on the property. Walter S. Hunt, Jr., in a report for HABS dated June 12, 1957, states without documentation that Stonewall Jackson, as a Director of the Lexington Savings Institution, had an office in the building.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

A Federal three story brick building. Unusual diapering of end walls. Bracketed roof and wrought iron balcony probably added.

Condition: Walls and floors sound; interior requires renovation and preservative treatment.

B. Technical Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: $44\frac{1}{2}$ x 34.
2. Foundations: Cut stone underpinnings.
3. Walls: The walls were built on the spot from local red clay, probably from excavations made for the foundations. The walls are laid in Flemish bond, four bricks thick, with an exceptional diapering work in the wall facing Washington Street.
4. Chimneys: Four, one in each corner, related to the fireplaces located diagonally in the second and third floor corners.

5. Roof: Italian Renaissance palace roof; cornice with brackets, c. 1870.
6. Additions: Second story wrought iron balcony (early 19th century) and rear porch added after original construction.
7. Windows: 9/9 double-hung. Lintels: gauged flat arch in brick. North front window perhaps original.

C. Interior:

First Floor, Southwest Corner: Single beaded base board; chair rail forms window stool; walls and ceiling plaster; no cornice; random width pine floors; corner fireplace with surround molding.

First Floor, Southeast corner: Partial chair rail; sash not original; door carving beaded round; door reversed; assorted hardware, some original; corner fireplace.

First floor, Northeast Corner: Stamped metal cornice; chair rail; three part door casing; old carpenter rim lock; gravity hinges; peg strip mounted at top of door casing; later mantel; original sash. Wall between hall and room probably a later addition.

First floor, North West Corner. Chair rail. Door sheathed with broad boards in V pattern; iron strap hinges.

Walls: plaster on hand split wood laths.

Stairs with winders, turned spindles in natural wood; turned newel and modern hand rail.

Second floor, South west. Original locks; door hung on H & L hinges

Second floor, Southeast: later Greek revival type door; Door to hall 6 panel raised panel door, original

Hall: Later door and partition cutting hall.

Second floor, Northeast: Original sash, original mantel; chair rail and simple base.

Bibliography and References

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Architectural data by Nathaniel Neblett, architect, representing
J.Everette Fauber, A.I.A.

Historical data by Carrington C. Tutwiler Jr.

Edited for HABS by: Druscilla J. Null
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Note: For further information, see also - Lyle, Royster, Jr. and Simpson, Pamela.
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Addendum to
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